

The same crew drinks coffee in the cafe in Mertzon every morning. Ranchers and gas plant jockeys are the dominant occupations represented. However,, scatterings of all trades show up for the predawn session. Bad conscience, as I have mentioned before is the motivation that drives most of them from their beds.

This morning an old boy kept the conversation on the other depression, the one that happened in the '30s. In the time it took him to eat a platter of sausage and eggs, he shipped four strings of lambs for a dollar a head. The fellow sitting with him took care of the bankruptcy tales. Before they had finished their last round, the other customers were talking in whispers.

On the way to the ranch, I got to thinking about what the Great Depression meant to the children of that era. The cedar hills were overrun by kids in those days. Grownups were smart enough to know that storks didn't bring babies, but the land was so overburdened by big families that the sight of any bird with a wingspread over 14 inches was sufficient to panic the entire community.

My school mates were as mean as a sack of South American lizards. Schoolteachers worked as hard as the cowboys who had to ride the rough string on the ranches, lots of schoolmasters endured lives that would have frightened a seaport bartender.

Parents' attitudes were hard to understand. Every year a band of Gypsies would camp down on the river. Far and wide, these vagabonds were known as notorious kidnappers. Yet each time they broke camp, mothers all over town would send their sons down to watch them leave.

Nothing ever came of the custom. Other tribes scorned this particular band for being dumb; but the Gypsies knew better than to try to sort anything from our rusty herd to hold for ransom money. The whole township couldn't have raised a hundred dollar bond to save the local banker, much less the pin money it would have taken to spring a kid.

Mothers did love their children. One time a boy ran off from home to keep from going to school. His mother looked all over her front yard before she abandoned the search. She was so frantic that the neighbors could hear her calling him clear across the street. It wouldn't have done any good to call the sheriff. Elective offices in the Depression were too hard to hold to risk losing votes over finding a lost kid. You know, I never did hear where that boy went. Some people said he was probably hiding in some distant spot like San Angelo or Brownwood. In those days a set of grown triplets could have been hidden in the courthouse square without a search party finding them. I was 21 years old before I knew that the outfit they dredged the river with didn't have any more teeth in it than an old ewe.

My contemporaries call the '30s the good old days. What was good about it has never been explained. Here at Mertzon we had only 40 odd miles of spring fed river to fish and hunt on. Town kids had to walk nearly a half a mile to go swimming. Life on that river was too peaceful to compare to the marvels the children enjoy today.

The countryside was unblessed by machine-made beauty. Distant hillsides were unmarked by oil rigs of aluminum tank batteries. An endless purple haze of a formation of clouds had to garnish the horizon. Hills and valleys were just plain natural landmarks. Slush pits and caliche dumps were to come later on. It was pleasing to look at, but the whole picture was as ordinary as any of nature's scheme.

Trees along the river did turn gold in the autumn. However, to see a creosoted pole or a string of insulated wires you had to go to the railroad tracks. The railroad, in fact, was the only source of soot and smoke. Folks in the '30s wouldn't have known how to appreciate smog floating from the factories on the Ohio river valley or diesel trucks laying a smokescreen a mile long.

Discussing one depression while another one is going on is bad for morale. You are not going to catch me saying that I want to go back to messing around on riverbanks when I can see the same things on the Disney program any Sunday night. Tomorrow will be the good old days as far as I'm concerned.